

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA
Minister for Communities
Department for Communities
Causeway Exchange
1-7 Bedford Street
Belfast
County Antrim
BT2 7EG

27th October 2020

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries (CBBB) project to you to advise of the serious hardship that the decision to halt the issuing of National Insurance numbers (NIN) is having on new comer workers, and to raise concerns around the possible impact the decision could have on the spread of Covid-19 in workplaces.

The CBBB project brings together the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC ICTU), the Community Intercultural Programme (CIP) and the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) to work with people from a migrant and local background on challenging exploitation, sectarianism, racism and discrimination in the labour market. The project is funded by the PEACE IV Programme.

We are aware of the recent arrival here of a significant number of workers, mainly, but not exclusively, from Bulgaria, Portugal and Romania. Many of them have found employment without NINs through agencies in the agri-food sector.

New workers have been raising their concerns with us regarding their inability to access NINs as it means that they cannot qualify for SSP when they become ill. Other difficulties they are facing include not being able to register with a GP and access the free health services that they are entitled to, inability to open bank accounts (if they have no proof of residence) and some are experiencing complications trying to register for benefits for their families.

As I'm sure you will realise, this is putting individuals and families in considerable hardship.

Irish Congress of Trade Unions
45-47 Donegall Street
Belfast
BT1 2FG

T
F **I&S**

info@ictuni.org
www.ictuni.org

Head Office: Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 32 Parnell Square, Dublin 1



The Project is also concerned that, given the well documented spread of Covid-19 in meat processing factories, where many of the newcomers are working, that some workers in this perilous position may opt to continue working while experiencing Covid-19 symptoms, as going off sick will leave them and their families destitute and possibly homeless.

We are aware that the decision to suspend parts of the National Insurance number application process during the pandemic was taken by the GB government so that it could redeploy staff. However, we are writing to enquire if your Department can recommence the issuing of NINs for new comer workers?

We understand that the temporary closure of the local processing centres has halted face to face 'Evidence of Identity' interviews, but we believe that alternative processes could be put in place that protect staff while maintaining the service.

If it would be useful, we would be happy to meet with you, your officials and/or the trade union for the office staff to discuss how we can urgently address this problem.

We look forward to your early response on this urgent matter. If you wish to discuss further you can contact me at kevin.doherty@ictuni.org

Yours sincerely

PD

Kevin Doherty
Migrant Workers Support Unit
ICTU